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ABSTRACT

Presented at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1978, the paper analyzes the often awkward and confusing interaction between the deaf and the hearing, as it relates to the impact of the handicap and its accompanying limitations on social interaction. Those factors causing strain in encounters between the deaf and the hearing are examined, along with coping strategies used by both parties. It is concluded that encounters between the disabled and nondisabled cannot be fully understood by appealing to stigmatization; rather, the impact of the impairment itself must be understood. (DLS)

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ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE DISABLED AND THE NONDISABLED: BRINGING THE IMPAIRMENT BACK IN

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A paper prepared for presentation at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, September 4-8, 1978 in San Francisco.

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Encounters between the physically disabled and the nondisabled are often strained and uncomfortable for both parties due to the uncertainty or lack of agreement as to how they should handle the disability (Ladieu et al., 1948; B. Wright, 1960; Davis, 1961; Kleck et al., 1966; Richardson, 1969). Central to this interactional strain is stigma and acceptance (Goffman, 1963). Disabled people do not want to be, but find that they often are treated primarily as different, odd or deviant. The nondisabled fail to accord them the respect and regard which the disabled believe their other attributes entitle them to. The disabled, though, may resist their stigmatization. By presenting preferred self-definitions or establishing near-normal social relationships with the nondisabled, they reject imputations that there identities are spoiled (Davis, 1961; Goffman, 1963; Voysey, 1972; Levitin, 1975). Stigmatization, though, cannot fully explain interaction between the disabled and nondisabled.

Encounters between the disabled and nondisabled are often strained due to the impairments themselves and how they are managed. While blindness is a stigma, certain features of a blind-sighted encounter can only be understood as the result of the strain that a visual impairment may create for the interaction. Blindness may interfere with establishing both interactants' identities; it may create communication problems for both the blind and sighted; and it may lead to the blind's extreme social dependence upon the sighted (Scott, 1969a, 1969b). Impairments, though, are not necessarily disruptive or limiting.

Whether impairments are disruptive or not depends on the specific situation (B. Wright, 1960). Blindness does not interfere with telephone conversations, but it may disrupt face-to-face encounters as mentioned above. Disabilities are disruptive in certain situations when they cause the assumptions and routine practices which usually successfully maintain interaction in those situations to become problematic. Coping strategies used by both the disabled and nondisabled are attempts to compensate for those assumptions and practices which this time have failed.

Disabled people's primary concern is often to accomplish everyday activities and not merely to manage their putatively spoiled identities. Therefore, the strategies they use to facilitate interaction with the nondisabled may convey their impairment. Canes and guide dogs identify the blind as visually impaired. Yet, those devices aid the blind's mobility. As I examine later, the strategies that the disabled use may even imply that they are more impaired than they are.

In this paper I analyze the often awkward and confusing interaction which occurs in short term, usually mundane and typically impersonal encounters between the deaf and the hearing.[1] Interaction between a clerk and a customer is one such encounter. Interaction between the deaf and the hearing is disrupted due to the impact of the impairment and of its accompanying limitations on social interaction. Once those disruptions have been identified, I examine how the deaf and the hearing cope with them.

My intent is to show that encounters between the disabled and nondisabled cannot be fully understood by appealing to stigmatization. The impact of the impairment itself must be understood. Further, stigmatization partly reflects that impact; that important, but taken-for-granted features of social interaction have been disrupted. It does not merely indicate the disabled's violation of strongly held values regarding physical integrity and attractiveness (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970).

Methods

I draw on materials from in-depth interviews with seventy-five hearing impaired people and fifteen counselors or friends of the deaf, personal observation of deaf-hearing encounters, and published sources by and about the deaf (Higgins, 1977). The materials that I present typify the assumptions and routine practices that people use in structuring interaction (Goffman, 1974: 14-15).

Conversation

Much of human interaction is based on the assumption that people can hear and speak. We communicate through telephones, radios, television, intercom systems and loudspeakers. Warning signals are often buzzers, sirens or alarms. Time is structured by bells and whistles. And people talk. In conversation, which "assumes an easy exchange of speaker-hearer role", strain occurs between the deaf and hearing (Goffman, 1974: 498).

An easy exchange of speaker-hearer role requires competence in the language used (Chomsky, 1965). It also requires competence in the norms and forms of interaction that the ethnographers and ethnomethodologists of communication have investigated: turn taking, whom to address, when to talk, what style of speech to use, etc. (Schegloff, 1968; Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Hymes, 1974; Schiffrin, 1977). People typically must also be able to hear and speak, though not necessarily as I explain later. Inadequate performances at each level of competence can strain conversation.

In this paper I focus on hearing and speaking. As I demonstrate later, though, the interaction between foreigners resembles in many ways encounters between the deaf and the hearing. Therefore, the assumptions and routine practices which I examine for hearing and speaking seem to occur at other levels of competence involved in performing hearing and speaking roles; for

example, linguistic competence.

Strain in Encounters between the Deaf and the Hearing

Strain in encounters between the deaf and the hearing is due to the impact of deafness and of its accompanying limitations on conversation. The effects of deafness on conversation are fully realized within the assumptions and routine practices of hearing people. These assumptions and practices usually successfully maintain interaction. Yet they lead to strain and confusion when applied to encounters with the deaf.

If there are no contradictory cues, hearing people typically assume that everyone can hear and speak. Second, hearing people may infer, that those who speak can hear. Third, if people are perceived as deaf, then their speech may not be understood.

Hearing people typically assume that everyone can hear. To point out the obvious, hearing people rarely initiate a conversation with the inquiry as to the other person's hearing ability. Hearing people know that some people are deaf, but they do not routinely act as if that were the case. Because deafness is an invisible impairment, interacting with a deaf person does not necessarily reveal the person's deafness. Usually, though, hearing people realize that the person they are interacting with is deaf by the latter's self-disclosure, display of a hearing aid or inability to respond to auditory stimuli. This violated assumption makes hearing people uncertain as to how to proceed, and leads to coping strategies by both parties to communicate in spite of the difficulty. The coping strategies, themselves, may lead to additional strain as I will examine later.

Because deafness is not readily visible and because the assumption that everyone can hear is rarely seen as problematic, deaf people can literally

become victims of that assumption:

> Deaf-mute found fatally shot:
>
> A deaf-mute was found shot to death
> Friday in what police believe was a
> killing prompted by the victim's inability
> to hear and obey a robber's demands.
> (Chicago Sun Times, May 31, 1975: 5)

The robber assumed that his victim could hear, and this assumption lead him to misframe (Goffman, 1974) the actions of the deaf man. The deaf-mute was treated as an uncooperative hearing person, rather than being seen as a deaf person who temporarily could not cooperate.

A more common instance of hearing being taken for granted occurs in stores. Deaf people may be conversing, however awkwardly, with a sales clerk. Casually the clerk turns and involves other store personnel in the transaction. Such behavior is common and is not meant to nor does it exclude a hearing customer from what it is happening. Yet the store clerk's routine action for hearing customers effectively excludes deaf customers from being completely informed.

Even hearing people who are acquainted with a deaf individual; friends, coworkers, or team members, may momentarily overlook that the individual is deaf. This seems to occur especially in gatherings of several hearing people and leads the deaf individual to be and to feel left out. A similar situation may occur for a foreigner who does not know well the language that the other people at the gathering are using.

Hearing people also assume that everyone can talk. Many deaf people, though, cannot talk or their speech is unintelligible. Other deaf individuals'

speech becomes intelligible only after the hearing person has become familiar with it. Several respondents noted that at schools for the deaf their speech was judged to be good by their teachers, but once they left school they had difficulty being understood. For example, a deaf woman ordered hot chocolate but received a hot dog instead. These embarrassing and frustrating occasions of misunderstanding lead some deaf individuals to cease speaking.

Deaf people who do speak, though, cannot auditorily monitor their speech. This may strain encounters with the hearing. These strains are most likely to occur for those who were born deaf or loss their hearing at an early age. What was meant for only a few people may be braodcast throughout the entire room, or deaf people may find the hearing listeners staring with incomprehension because their speech has become inaudible. The deaf may mispronounce words without realizing it, because they do not hear their mistakes. This inability of deaf people to obtain auditory feedback of their speech also leads to what might be called "deafisms".[2] During conversation or in reverie, deaf people may emit strange vocal sounds, clicking noises, humming sounds or grunts. Though they are unaware that they are producing such potentially distracting and disturbing noises, the result is to strain the interaction with the hearing.

Due to the quality and inflection of deaf people's speech, mistaken characteristics may be attributed to them. One deaf woman explained that:

> Her first husband, a hearing man, told her not to talk to him while they were out in public. The husband felt that her voice was high pitched, and sounded like a retarded person's voice.

Though false attributions can be made about anyone, the deaf are likely to experience them due to the quality of their speech.

Hearing people ususlly infer that anyone who can speak can also hear. Yet, some deaf people have intelligible speech, but they cannot hear. Many deaf people with intelligible speech find that if they talk to a hearing person, then they are spoken to as if they were hearing. The deaf individual must then inform the person that they are deaf. Informing hearing people that one is deaf, though, may only elicit statements of "deaf and dumb" or visible indications that the hearing people are tense and do not know how to proceed. Other times, deaf people may not be believed:

> Every time he (a deaf person) used his speech to place his request, the airline clerk would automatically answer orally, giving the necessary details which would most of the time contain numbers. The deaf man found it was very easy to misread lips, and would end up with reservations for wrong flights. Then he would have a very difficult time convincing the clerk that he could not hear and that it would be better for the clerk to jot down the needed information so that he could be 100 percent sure before confirming the reservation; the clerk could not understand that one who spoke so well could have a hard time understanding him in turn! (Jacobs, 1974: 22)

Because deafness is not immediately visible, hearing people may continue to assume that speaking implies hearing even though deaf people declare their deafness. Other deaf people with useable, if not "perfect" speech, have been mistaken for being German or English, rather than recognized as being deaf. Not only were the deaf assumed to be hearing because of their serviceable speech, but an additional, mistaken characteristic was attributed to them.

Americans who speak a foreign language better than they understand it may encounter similar problems in that foreign country as are encountered at the airline ticket counter by the deaf man with good speech. Americans who telephone "good morning" in Spanish to a Mexican hotel clerk or order dinner in French in a Paris restaurant may find that their interactional partners respond rapidly in their native languages. This may leave the Americans bewildered and chagrined. Because there were no other cues to the contrary, the Americans' performances as speakers let their foreign interactional partners to infer that they were competent hearers.

Hearing people may also infer that if one is deaf, then one cannot speak, at least not intelligibly. This inference dates at least to Aristotle's conclusion that those born deaf were also speechless (Bender, 1970). One deaf man mentioned that a recurring problem in his life was to have hearing people no longer understand his speech once they learned of his deafness. This situation, though, appears to occur less frequently than the others I have discussed.

Coping Strategies:

While encounters between the deaf and the hearing are often strained and confused, both parties usually attempt to be understood. These coping strategies may be effective, but they may also lead to additional strain.

Though by definition, the deaf cannot hear and understand speech, they may still attempt to perform the hearing role. A general strategy is to pretend that they understand the speaker's talk. The deaf smile, nod in agreement, and the speaker may proceed none the wiser. As one deaf man remarked, if the conversation is not that important, he lets it pass. Yet the conversation could become important without his knowing it. Such a strategy

allows the interaction to pr[illegible]r the hearing speaker, but not for the deaf hearer. Further, if th[illegible]r asks a question or expects a comment, awkward silence may predominate for both. The deaf individual's smiles and nods no longer suffice as appropriate responses.

Some deaf attempt to perform the hearer role through lipreading. Lipreading, though, is often inadequate. Many speech sounds are indistinguishable on the speaker's lips (e.g. /b/ and /p/). Hearing people often talk through pursed lips or enunciate poorly. Facial hair of male speakers can obscure the visibility of their speech. Strangers are more difficult to lipread than those who are familiar (Pintner, 1929). Foreign accents amke lipreading even more difficult. A gathering of several people poses multiple problems: sight lines from the deaf to the various potential speakers are not equally clear and if they were, such an arrangement would inhibit the interaction; it is difficult to follow the talk as it moves from one speaker to another; and the talk itself may be composed of simultaneous emissions from several speakers.

Consequently, deaf people may silently sit in group situations or avoid them all together if possible. Some tell their hearing workers to continue without them at the coffee break, while others may occasionally ask, "What's going on?" A relatively few may even try to show the hearing people how it feels to be left out. They may take a hearing coworker out to lunch with deaf friends who sign.

Further, those deaf who use lipreading to play the hearer role must contend with the coping strategies that many hearing people use when they learn that their interactional partner is deaf. Hearing people often exaggerate their mouth movements in the well-intentioned, but mistaken belief that such movements make it easier for the deaf person to receive their speech. Some, familiar only with the "hard of hearing" or using the "hard of hearing" as a model for the deaf,

shout or move closer to the deaf person's ear. This action serves only to bring stares from passers-by and further inhibit the interaction. The approach of the speaker toward the deaf person's ear can also lead to the following, as described by a deaf lipreader:

> At all costs I must keep my line of vision to his face; so I step back. If this is a badly managed encounter we may now begin to perform a kind of slow tango. Here is X advancing on my ear, myself retreating step for step, eyes fixed on my partner's face. (D. Wright, 1969: 114)

What occurred is a distancing problem that Hall (1959, 1966) has discussed for cross-cultural encounters.

The above incident illustrates another strain that my arise when deaf people attempt to play the hearing role through lipreading. In order to lipread, the deaf person must maintain constant focus on the speaker's face. This constant attention can make hearing speakers uncomfortable because they are rarely use to continual eyecontact from the listener (Argyle and Dean, 1965). It may also lead these speakers to shift their face, thus causing the deaf lipreader to miss what was said.

Even if deaf people are successful in lipreading hearing people's spoken words, misunderstandings may still occur. The deaf may lose the information that speech conveys auditorily; for example, through intonation or emphasis. Consequently, the emotion or intent of the speaker might be misinterpreted (Schiff and Thayer, 1974).

As speakers the deaf employ several strategies. Those who have difficulty moderating their speech due to a lack of auditory feedback may arrange for a "wise" hearing person to accompany them and provide visual feedback (e.g. hand

signals) in place of the missing auditory feedback. Some deaf choose not to speak if they feel that their speech is irritating to hearing people or will be misunderstood.

Those deaf individuals whose speech may lead hearing people to mistakenly identify them as hearing sometimes use a simple strategy. In those situations where prolonged contact will not occur, the deaf may write their message rather than speak it. The deaf man who had problems at ticket counters does so now when requesting airline information (Jacobs, 1974). By doing so, the deaf man not only avows his deviance of deafness (Turner, 1972), but implies a second discrediting trait of mutism which he does not possess.

Different strategies are used by those deaf whose speech becomes unintelligible to hearing people once hearing people know of the deafness. Some deaf people keep their impairment a secret from the hearing person. Others will reveal it as soon as they feel the hearing listener has become accustom to their speech. Some deaf people will wear a hearing aid (Jacobs, 1974). Though the deaf person's speech does not improve, it remains intelligible to the hearing person because the deaf person is no longer viewed as a grossly defective hearer. The deaf person is only mildly defective (i.e. "hard of hearing") and still capable of speaking intelligibly. In passing as hard of hearing, these deaf people are not concerned with their spoiled identities. Rather, they are using practical, learned strategies which allow the interaction with the hearing person to proceed more smoothly.

As noted before, though, hearing people may treat deaf people as "hard of hearing". The hearing shout or move closer to deaf people's ears (Webb et al., 1966: 150). Deaf people who wear a hearing aid so that their speech will remain intelligible to hearing people may find that it becomes difficult

to lipread a hearing person as the latter shouts or advances on the deaf's person's ear. A strategy to combat one strain may increase the likelihood of another.

Some deaf people do not have useable speech. These deaf people do not play the speaker role, but they still attempt to communicate with hearing people through writing or gestures. While these deaf people may be understood, the interaction is rarely smooth and uninhibited. After reading a deaf person's written message, hearing people may talk to rather than write to the deaf person. When this happens, those deaf who do not lipread must explicitly state that they have a hearing impairment which requires the hearing to write rather than speak their message. Hearing people, though, may be uncomfortable with writing and simply leave the deaf person standing with paper and pencil in hand.

Further, misunderstandings may occur because the writing or gesture of the deaf person is interpreted within a different symbolic framework than that from which it was produced (Stokoe and Battison, 1975). A dramatic example of that occurred when a deaf youth was mistaken for a bank robber (Deaf American, 1973: 29). The youth walked into a bank and handed the teller two notes; the first asking for a zipper bag and the second stating that he would be back with 2,500 coins. While the meaning of the youth's notes seems clear, the bank teller misframed his actions because of the assumption that everyone can hear and speak. If everyone can hear and speak, then the only reason that people would write a note in a bank is if they were attempting to rob it.

Discussion

Stigmatization cannot fully account for the strained interaction between the physically disabled and the nondisabled. Encounters between the disabled and the nondisabled are also disrupted due to the impact of the disabled's impairment and its accompanying limitations upon the interaction.

Further, the disabled are stigmatized not merely because they violate strongly held values regarding health and beauty, but also because their impairments disrupt social interaction. Labeling theorists have often investigated and emphasized the visibly disabled (Davis, 1961; Barry, 1973; Levitin, 1975). Consequently, their viewing stigmatization as a violation of valued norms regarding physical integrity and attractiveness is understandable. Yet, disabilities which are less visible but nonetheless stigmatized, deafness for example, indicate the shortcomings of such an approach. As the disability entails greater functional impairment, an appeal to the violation of widely shared norms as the reason for stigmatization becomes less useful. Therefore, stigmatization of the disabled also indicates that important, but taken-for-granted features of social interaction are disrupted.

Of course, once the disabled are stigmatized due to their impairments' disruptive consequences, their stigmata can further inhibit interaction with the nondisabled. Knowledge of their putatively spoiled identities can be passed to others who have yet to interact with the disabled. Characteristics which implicate all areas of the disabled's personality will be developed (Scott, 1972: 14). The stigmatization takes on a life of its own.

Conclusion:

Sociologists have constructed an "over-stigmatized" conception of the physically disabled.[3] In emphasizing the disabled's putatively spoiled

identities, they have often overlooked the disabled's impairment. Encounters between the disabled and the nondisabled are also strained due to the impact of the disabled's impairment upon the interaction. That impact is fully realized within the nondisabled's assumptions and routine practices which underly and usually successfully maintain interaction. Therefore, in order to understand the physically disabled, we need to bring the impairment back in.

FOOTNOTES

1. Debate continues as to what should be meant by the term "deaf". In this paper, someone is deaf who cannot hear and understand speech. This definition is based on one by Schein and Delk (1974). Schein (1968) discusses the factors (e.g. chronicity, age of onset, degree of loss) involved in defining deafness and examines previous definitions.
2. A similar term, "blindisms", denotes the self-stimulating body movements of the blind due to the lack of visual feedback and stimulation. The blind manipulate their face, tilt their body and have ticks and twitches of the face which disrupt communication with the sighted (Carroll, 1961).
3. I thank Hanan Selvin for his analogy to Dennis Wrong's oversocialized conception of man.

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